

RESPONDING TO FEMINIST MOVEMENTS DURING COVID-19

KEY LEARNINGS, REFLECTIONS, AND
RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE ASIA AND PACIFIC
CHAPTER OF THE PROSPERA INTERNATIONAL
NETWORK OF WOMEN'S FUNDS



SUMMARY REPORT



About Us

Prospera Asia and Pacific is the regional chapter of the Prospera International Network of Women's Funds. We are made up of eight women's funds namely the Women's Fund Fiji, HER Fund, Korea Foundation for Women, Mongolian Women's Fund, South Asia Women Foundation India, TEWA, Women's Fund Asia, and the Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights, Asia & Pacific.

Acknowledgments

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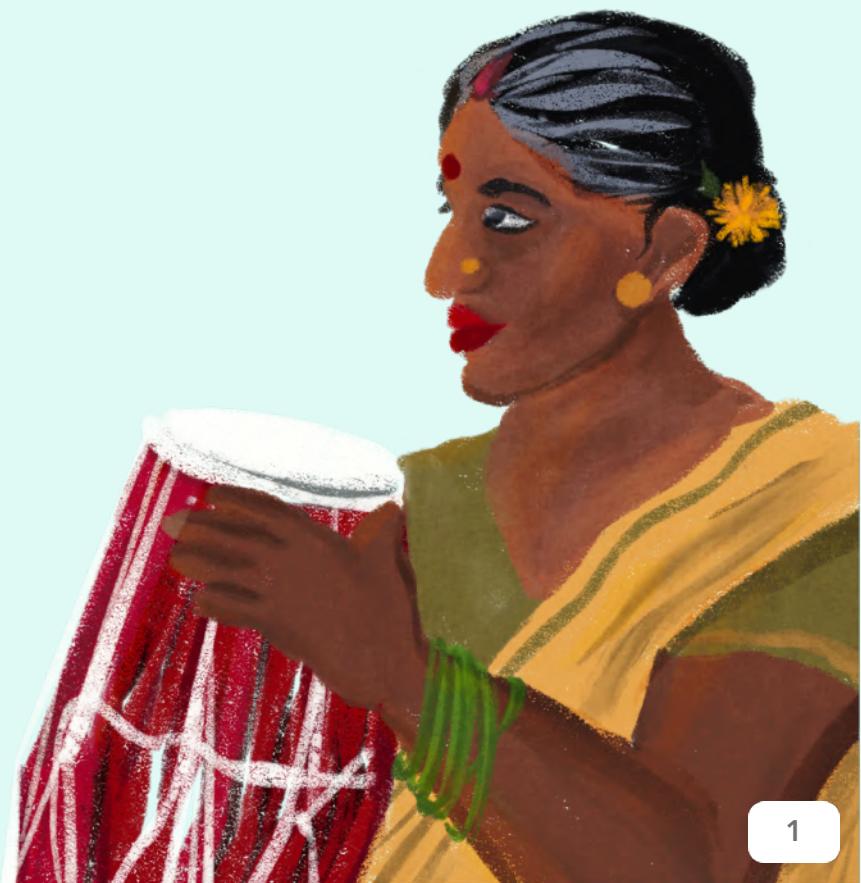
Setting the Context

It has been clear that women, girls, trans*, and intersex people and other marginalised and vulnerable groups bear the brunt of the ongoing COVID-19 induced social economic and political crisis. Across all regions, and particularly in Asia, there has been an increase in authoritarianism, militarisation, surveillance and control over populations under the guise of enforcement of social distancing measures. During a crisis, marginalised groups faced increased vulnerabilities, from heightened risk of infection, through to neglect and violence. Cases of gender-based violence during lockdown and curfews have increased. In five Pacific Island countries, as lockdowns took effect, UN Women immediately surveyed crisis centres, confirming a major increase in calls to their helplines reporting Gender Based Violence.

Government responses undermined human rights and did not consider socio-economic impacts of COVID-19, in particular the needs of girls, women, LGBTIQ people, migrants, informal workers, sex workers, and isolated rural communities; groups and populations that were already at risk of increased violence and marginalisation. Women and girls with disabilities face additional, gendered risks, particularly sexual violence, and isolation with abusive carers and/or family members. With quarantine and social isolation measures, women and girls have even less access to outside support and help as services and facilities are closed. It is therefore critical to consider the specific risks and increased vulnerabilities of those who face multiple and intersecting forms of marginalisation including gender, age, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, disability, poverty and geography.

The immediate economic impact was felt by women and trans* people working in sectors vulnerable to the pandemic including tourism and small business. This was further exacerbated by country lockdowns where countries across the world were at a standstill for months with only essential services operating. This increased women's responsibility of child-care, with reduced or loss of livelihoods, challenged food security and accessing health services, increased violence against women, girls and trans* people, and even increased cyber-crimes and hatred towards women on social media.

As the COVID-19 crisis impacted countries across the world, women's funds moved quickly, adapting to a rapidly changing context to support the immediate needs of our grantees and communities. Women's funds played a critical role to ensure that human rights, and the human rights of women, girls, trans* people and other marginalised groups are central to responses during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to strategies for recovery.





As with many organisations when operating under lock down conditions, working from home can be challenging and women's funds had to establish its operations virtually as well as support its grantee partners to navigate the new online territory. While the pandemic heightened the needs and vulnerabilities of women and girls, Women-Focused Organisations (WFO) and women's funds that serve them have experienced severe operational and funding challenges. According to an analysis of data available on Devex's funding platform, funding commitments to combating COVID-19 from January 2020 to April 2021 show funding commitments exceeding US\$21.3 trillion through awarded contracts, grants, new programs, tenders, and open funding opportunities to sectors such as education, economic, food security, health, gender, protection.

However, data¹ shows persistent underfunding to initiatives for gender equality and for gender based funding prevention and response in humanitarian action globally.²

The Gender in Humanitarian Action (GiHA) Working Group conducted an analysis of 20 humanitarian and multi-sector plans in response to COVID-19 across the Asia-Pacific region. In less than half of the documents assessed (45–50%) mention the collection and use of sex, age, and disability disaggregated data and the need to conduct gender analysis. Gender analysis and sex, age, and disability disaggregated data is vital to improve the quality of responses and to meaningfully inform response and planning processes. One quarter (25%) of the plans assessed by GiHA makes no mention of any form of engagement of women's group and networks, or women's leadership in planning and implementation. As early as April 2020, 71% of WFOs' reported that COVID-19 was affecting them somewhat or very negatively, with 12% suspending activities altogether. Therefore, there is a need to increase funding to Women's funds so they can continue to support the work of women, girls, trans* people and marginalised groups.

¹ OECD, *Aid Focussed on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment* (2020), <https://www.oecd.org/development/gender-development/Aid-Focussed-on-Gender-Equality-and-Women-s-Empowerment-2020.pdf>

² The Guardian, *Only 1% of gender equality funding is going to women's organisations – why?*, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/jul/02/gender-equality-support-1bn-boost-how-to-spend-it>



Our Collective Response to COVID-19 induced emergency



Mobilising resources in a COVID-19 heavy context meant working creatively, flexibly, and with clear intent to ensure support reached those in most need. We used our limited resources effectively, employing multiple strategies that were grounded in deep listening and consultation with our grantees and partners. This enabled us to quickly understand what support was needed, and how to ensure this support was holistic and reached those most impacted by the pandemic. The experience of mobilising resources during the COVID-19 pandemic has affirmed what women's funds have long been advocating for: a feminist resource mobilisation agenda that is responsive to women and trans* rights, informed by the diverse and inter-connected needs of groups, and built on meaningful engagement with funding partners. Women's funds can play an important role to bridge this funding and resource distribution agenda.

We utilised multiple strategies to mobilise resources. Collectively, the

eight funds raised a total of USD 2,342,483 in new funding to channel to partners in response to COVID-19 across 25 countries in Asia and Pacific. This does not include existing grants where Women's Funds repurposed funding to address COVID-19 related activities identified by grantees.

Key strategies included:

- 1) Mobilising and distributing resources from within by adapting existing grants and working with existing grantees to repurpose and reallocate funding to be responsive to grantee need;
- 2) Leveraging resources amongst women's funds to support each other;
- 3) Raising external funds;
- 4) Influencing funders to challenge and break the hierarchy of needs when funding in an emergency; and
- 5) Resourcing that is grounded in lived realities and evidence base.

Our learnings on resource mobilisation

- **Supporting a feminist resource mobilisation agenda during and beyond COVID-19:** Women's funds principles and capacities were tested during COVID-19, being at the nexus between the grantee partners and communities served, and funders, we were constantly reflecting, learning, and strategising to ensure support was responsive and grounded in the realities of grantees, while managing funder requirements and restrictions. Raising resources within the pandemic has been closely linked with raising awareness about the intersectional issues affecting grantees and their communities, with the aim of advocating for resourcing of these issues to support women and trans* rights and communities that are most at risk while remaining marginalised from mainstream funding. While we continued to work individually at fund level and collectively as a network to raise resources, and disburse COVID-19 emergency grants and support, we remained focused on the work ahead, in supporting resilience beyond COVID-19.
- **Placing people at the centre of resource mobilisation, flexible, and emergency-informed fundraising:** Having a deliberate and intentional focus on partners and their well-being based on trusted and strong connections to the local communities they serve, has enabled us to improvise during the pandemic, and raise funding for changing needs on the ground by influencing funders with facts, and movement-based realities. The resources are then made available for a range of support- from health, materials such as personal protective equipment, safety and security, care, and wellbeing grants, to rapid response grants, which all are required for building the resilience and sustainability of grantees over time. This approach to resource mobilisation and grant-making is at the core of Women's Funds, and became more pertinent while responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.



A key role of Women's Funds is to mobilise and distribute resources to feminist and women's rights movements. Resource mobilisation is one of the cornerstones of women's funds in providing critical and much-needed support that is responsive to women, girls, and trans* rights. Women's Funds are often under-resourced and work creatively and strategically with limited resources to garner support for our grantees.

The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the existing resource challenge women's funds face in working with limited resources to effectively address the myriad needs of our grantees. The limited resources for women's rights and to women's rights organisations is well documented. *Watering the Leaves, Starving the Roots*, by the Association for Women's Rights in Development, found that, in 2010, the median annual income of over 740 women's organisations around the world was just US\$20,000.³ The 2020 scoping study *Where is the money for women and girls in the Pacific?* commissioned by the Fiji Women's Fund and Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights Asia and the Pacific found that globally while women and girls and support for gender equality are increasingly a focus among donors, funding disbursements by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee members have declined over recent years in the Pacific with less than 1% of grant funding directed to women's organisations in the region.⁴

³ International Network of Women's Funds (2015) Collective Change: *The Value of Mobilizing Local Resources for Women's Rights in the Global South and East*. Accessed from: https://www.hrfn.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/1511120454_Compilation-Collective-Change-Case-Studies-of-Ten-Womens-Funds-2015.pdf

⁴ Fiji Women's Fund and Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights, Asia and Pacific (2020): *Where is the money for women and girls in the Pacific? Mapping funding gaps, opportunities and trends*. A scoping study. Accessed from: <https://fijiwomensfund.org/where-is-the-money/>

Our learnings on grant management

We had to adapt, use existing approaches, and develop our COVID-19 response grant funding mechanisms to be able to respond rapidly to the profound social and economic impact of the pandemic throughout the region. For some funds, this was the first time initiating emergency-response grant-making. As women's funds, we were among the first to mobilise, recognising that a crisis of such magnitude required a collaborative effort and decisive response. We employed various grant management responses:

- **Making structural adjustments to grant-making practices and providing flexible grants:** By listening to its grantees and the women, girls and trans* community on the ground, the women's funds were able to provide flexible and targeted grants. Knowing that in the region government responses to COVID-19 undermined human rights and did not take into account the needs of women, girls, LGBTIQ

people, migrants, informal workers and isolated rural communities, often excluding entire communities from relief and rehabilitation efforts, the women's funds were able to meet some of those immediate needs by repurposing existing grants; supporting women's groups to change their interventions focusing on COVID-19 activities of grants disbursed before the pandemic; establishing new emergency grants; and funding streams.

- **Addressing how the different forms of discrimination intersect with and amplify gender-based discrimination:** The data, information, and real-life stories that we gathered from its different data collection approaches became the basis for our targeted and intersectional grants. We supported operational costs of grantee partners while at the same time enabling grantee partners to provide direct relief supplies, support to enable counselling services to continue as essential services, supporting women's small businesses, and



targeting social protection schemes for those experiencing multiple and intersecting forms of vulnerability, such as from gender, race, age, and economic status. While the grantee partners were moving to address immediate lifesaving needs, the root causes of gender inequality were not lost and feminist principles were upheld.

- **Awareness raising and disseminating life-saving information:** A key issue shared is that there were groups of people that could not access nor understand the information about the pandemic, including how to protect themselves and others, and the nationwide restrictions and the impact that had on their work, families, and communities. We played a key role in ensuring our staff and grantees had access to timely and accurate information about the pandemic. This was done through regular phone calls, online meetings and supporting radio advertisements and pamphlets for information dissemination. Lack of

information and misinformation not only reduces wellbeing, but it can also have deadly consequences, and getting the information available in a language and format that all people can fully access and understand was important.

Key messages based on our learnings and experiences in giving grants during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- The pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing gender inequalities and the needs of women and girls, and added new operational challenges for women's funds.
- Movement building and collective action builds resilience.
- Long-term support is critical for effective COVID-19 response and recovery.
- Psychosocial support and mental health care and wellbeing is important in a crisis.
- Women's funds used the urgency of the crisis as an opportunity to strategise.
- Women's funds need to broaden their funding base to raise unrestricted funding.



Our commitments as women's funds

- **We will continue to prioritise collective and self-care:** Collective and self-care is a form of resilience and amid turmoil, is a powerful form of resistance.
- **We need each other and will continue to build a stronger solidarity network, including re-thinking how we connect and stay in touch:** Women's funds are connecting digitally out of necessity and will continue this to stay connected, to continue movement building and organising. In the COVID-19 era with physical distancing and travel restrictions a continued reality, communication, and relationships are so important to help address the crisis we are facing.
- **We will stay in the problem a bit longer- analyse, reflect, listen deeply to partners, and then develop our strategies as a Women's Fund:** Listening to our grantees, our partners, has served us well in building trust and credibility over time, helping to create powerful alliances and a united voice on issues. We need to continue to document our experiences and learnings as women's funds, and create safe, engaging spaces for conversations with our grantees, communities, and partners so that we remain responsive to their needs. This approach is also important to help ensure the sustainability and vibrancy of our movement over the long-term.
- **We will not lose focus of the other issues impacting our communities:** As women's funds we know that other key issues such as violence against women, health issues, and access to justice existed before COVID-19 and have been exacerbated during the pandemic. We must not lose sight of these issues and must continue to take an intentional, long-term view of the problem so that we can effectively influence and talk about where resources are going and need to go.
- **We will negotiate with our funders differently:** Funders have restrictions on funding, leaving critical gaps, particularly around the need for core support and funding that meets our needs as women's funds, and the needs of women's groups and collectives. Due to funding restrictions, we overtly worked with our past and current grantees. We need to broaden our funding base. As feminist funds individually or collectively we will continue to advocate for funding that truly meets our needs and collaborate and negotiate with our funders for more harmonised and transformative funding approaches.



Our recommendations to funders

- **Fund women, trans* and marginalised groups through unrestricted funding:** The impact of COVID-19 is global, its effects are widespread, and no country or community, regardless of social, economic or political status has been exempted by the pandemic. However, the pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on women (in all their diversities) and marginalised groups. It is important for funders to know this and to know how support through a women's fund facilitates the much needed, and in most cases life-saving support to these groups. Unrestricted funding enables women's funds to respond rapidly and flexibly, to decide where resources need to be spent, which is often on the issues that are under-dressed or overlooked, and marginalised groups.⁵ This is even more pertinent in a COVID-19 climate where groups and organisations are adapting to a constantly changing context.
- **Allocate resources for grantee capacity development and institutional strengthening of women's funds:** Connected to unrestricted funding is the need for funding that supports the growth, development, and sustainability of women's funds and our grantees. Unrestricted funding targeted at developing both grantee and women's funds organisational and programming capacity enables responses that are more flexible, strengthens local organisations, resulting in more vibrant organisations and more effective programming being delivered.
- **Continue to support women's funds beyond COVID-19:** The impacts of the pandemic are long-term. Core, flexible, long-term funding support directly for feminist groups is even more critical than before, particularly in contexts where human rights, good governance, and democracy are under threat. With

⁵ Mama Cash- Investing well in the right places: why fund women's funds. 2015. Accessed from: <https://www.mamacash.org/media/publications/mama-cash-why-womens-funds-feb-2015-final.pdf>



limited appropriate resourcing (financial and non-financial), women's funds will continue to be challenged with responding to immediate emergency and humanitarian support and the long term support aimed at systemic and structural changes. As reflected by a women's fund representative during the workshop, "It is important for funders to continue to invest in women's rights work, during this time and beyond COVID-19". Existing literature also highlights the value of investing in women's funds: "Women's funds are the drivers of collective action.....more funding to women's rights groups, organisations and movements is needed but donors cannot always reach those doing critical work. Women's funds are the mechanism to do so and work with a view to the long-term goal of securing rights for all women, girls and trans* groups".⁶



- **Adopt a more rights based approach to funding:** We strongly assert that all resource mobilisation should employ a rights based approach, an approach that is also shared by funders.
- **Continue to have funding dedicated specifically for humanitarian and emergency assistance (including COVID-19 response, natural disasters or any kind of crises), but balance this with a continued focus on funding for gender equality and women's rights:** There is a risk that programs focused on key national gender-equality issues may lose momentum, pushed to the back burner, or run out of monetary support before they can be completed.⁷ With COVID-19 causing major setbacks on gender equality gains, the need for funders to invest in long-term, flexible funding to groups like women's funds that espouse feminist and social justice principles and values is now needed more than ever before.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Fiji Women's Fund (2020) *A global pandemic and a tropical cyclone – How the Fiji Women's Fund's grantees are on the frontlines of recovery efforts*

